

Book Reviews

Ohinetahi: Garden, house and art

By Sir Miles Warren

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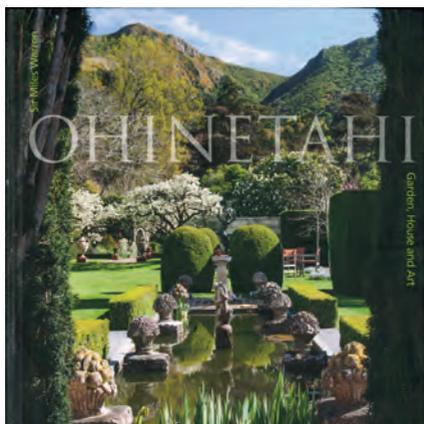
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Reviewed by Murray Dawson



In a recent issue of this journal¹, I reviewed two books on Trotts Garden near Ashburton. In this issue, I have the pleasure of reviewing a book written by another creator of an outstanding Canterbury garden – Ohinetahi by Sir Miles Warren of Governors Bay on Banks Peninsula.

Sir Miles Warren (Fig. 1) is a notable architect based in Christchurch. He formed the practice Warren and Mahoney in 1955 from which he retired in 1994. Since then, he has continued to be active as an architectural consultant and in developing his historic home and garden.



Fig. 1 Sir Miles Warren in his garden Ohinetahi. Photo courtesy Ohinetahi.

His book, *Ohinetahi: Garden, house and art*, has a similar layout to the Trotts garden books. Indeed, it was produced by the same company (Quentin Wilson and Associates, Christchurch), and they kindly loaned me their copy for this review.

The subtitle *Garden, house and art* is most fitting as it reflects Sir Miles erudite and broad tastes. His book follows the development of the garden, but also outlines the restoration of the house (before and following the Canterbury earthquakes), and notes the sculptures commissioned for the grounds and the artwork lodged in the house.

The first chapter provides an early history of European land ownership in Governors Bay including details of a cottage that first stood on the site. We are told that the name ‘Ohinetahi’ was given to the area by local Māori. Work to build the current house began in the mid-1850s, and in 1858 it was purchased by Thomas Henry Potts, a well-known British-born naturalist, ornithologist, entomologist and botanist. Potts extensively reconstructed the house (and it essentially remained in this configuration up until the 2010 earthquake). Potts also created a huge garden including vegetables, fruit trees and a fernery. As a keen collector of plants, Potts planted a considerable range of trees and some are still surviving today. These include historic camellias, English oaks (*Quercus robur*), hoop pine

(*Araucaria cunninghamii*), macrocarpa (*Cupressus macrocarpa*), Norfolk pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*), and silver birch (*Betula pendula*).

Great gardens don’t just happen – they require the vision of the owners and are created through decades of hard graft by a team of talented designers, builders, landscapers and gardeners. Sir Miles generously acknowledges the dedication of many who have shared the dream of Ohinetahi.

His sister Pauline (an accomplished artist and plantswoman) and brother-in-law (a fellow architect, the late John Trengrove) co-owned Ohinetahi when all three purchased it in 1976. They were, and are, talented gardeners who bought the property for the specific purpose of creating a grand garden. Readers are told that after they sold several respective properties to raise the funds to jointly purchase Ohinetahi, they embarked on a whistle-stop tour of the great English gardens before taking possession of their own garden to be. This tour provided a wealth of design and planting ideas to take with them. We are told that Hidcote Manor (in Gloucestershire) was a highlight that provided much inspiration for Ohinetahi.

Soon after moving in, they embarked on an extensive restoration of the house to make it more liveable, and much work was needed. It also fell into neglect earlier, in the 1900s (Fig. 2). As a professional architect, Sir Miles freely admits that “Ohinetahi must have accumulated more drawings per cubic metre than any other New Zealand house”! We read in a later chapter that Pauline and John left Ohinetahi after 12 years, but Sir Miles stayed on.



Fig. 2 1900s photograph of the house and grounds in a most neglected state. Photo courtesy Ohinetahi.

¹ *New Zealand Garden Journal*, 2016, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 29–32.

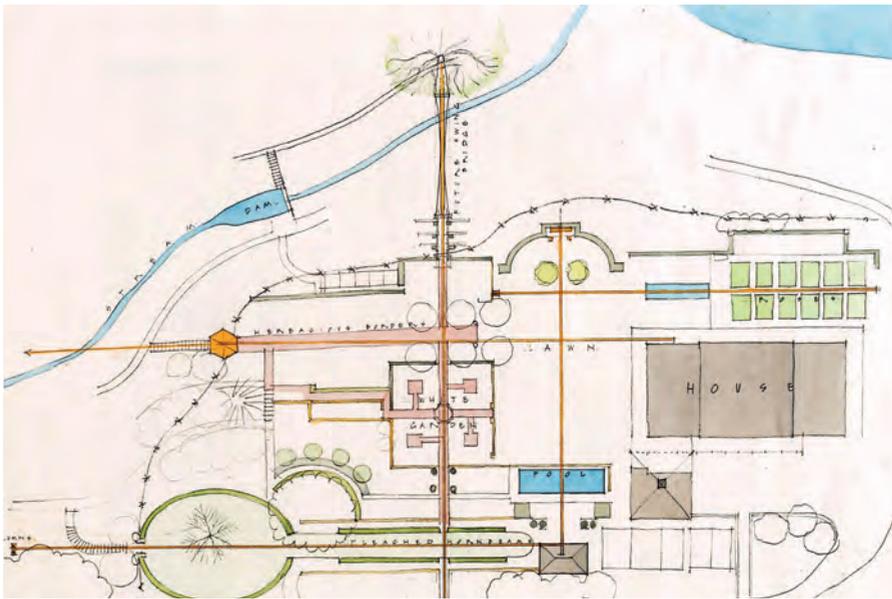


Fig. 3 Basic plan of the new garden. Photo courtesy Ohinetahi.

The bulk of the book comprises chapters devoted to the design of the new gardens. These are beautifully illustrated with concept drawings and watercolours (e.g., Fig. 3), and photographs of the completed garden areas.

Taking inspiration especially from Hidcote, they designed a garden of interconnected 'rooms', arranged along two axes. The six basic elements were:

1. A large lawn next to the house
2. A traditional rose garden framed by buxus edging
3. Herbaceous borders either side of a broad path
4. A white flowered garden
5. A swimming pool wisely doing double duty as an emergency water supply in case of fire²
6. A pleached hornbeam walk – hornbeams (*Carpinus betulus*) hedged to create a tall corridor.

Building upon this plan came a potager (traditional kitchen garden), themed plantings – a red garden (Fig. 4), and plantings of camellias, daylilies, peonies (Fig. 5), rhododendrons and magnolias – a woodland garden (Fig. 6) and native bush walk (in the formerly overgrown lower part of the garden), and, more recently (Fig. 7), a park-like setting and amphitheatre (following the purchase of some neighbouring land). Representative plants used are listed for many of these garden areas.



Fig. 4 Aerial view of the restored house and newly created red garden. Photo courtesy Ohinetahi.



Fig. 5 The peony garden. Photo courtesy Ohinetahi.



Fig. 6 The woodland garden. Photo courtesy Ohinetahi.



Fig. 7 Broad view of the house from the park. Photo courtesy Ohinetahi.

Hard structures include the pool and pool house, swing-bridge, viewing tower, sundial, folly, gazebo, garden walls, paths, steps, columns, and numerous garden sculptures.

Dare I say it, but has the eminent Sir Frederick Miles Warren (ONZ, KBE, FNZIA), also been a bit of a Jack-the-lad in his day? He seems to have had a remarkable knack of repurposing all sorts of interesting trophies for his garden 'at the right price'. Sir Miles recounts an amusing story of acquiring several crockets carved from Oamaru stone, which involved a ladder and a policeman. To be fair, he is likely to have also paid handsomely for the commissioned garden artworks from notable New Zealand sculptors.

As the garden grew they employed Mark Walker, their first full-time gardener and carpenter. Others who followed include Marilyn McRae, joined later by her brother-in-law Ross Booker, and more recently Mark Chandler. These and other contributors are acknowledged and have rightfully gained their places in the continuing history of Ohinetahi.

Damage from the Canterbury earthquake on 4th September 2010 must have dealt a terrible blow to Sir Miles. I recall the media of that time frequently mentioning the devastation of his house. A chapter of the book is dedicated to the rebuild of this Category 1 Historic Place. This involved removing the stone third storey of the house (which probably saved the building from the later 22nd February 2011 earthquake) and reconfiguring it as a more modest and less-imposing two-storey structure. Sir Miles accepted the challenging circumstances and the house was largely repaired and strengthened within a year. The garden plantings were relatively unscathed, although some of the garden structures needed repair.

² Fortunately, Ohinetahi escaped the February 2017 fires that ravished the Port Hills behind the property.



Fig. 8 North front of the house and garden. Photo courtesy Ohinetahi.

Ohinetahi has been awarded the six-star maximum by the RNZIH New Zealand Gardens Trust (NZGT; see www.gardens.org.nz/christchurch-canterbury-gardens/ohinetahi). This means that Ohinetahi garden provides one of New Zealand's top garden experiences, and achieves and maintains the highest levels of presentation, design and plant interest throughout the year. Six-star gardens are described as the complete package which inspire garden lovers and deliver an experience above all

other gardens. Ohinetahi attracts thousands of visitors each year.

Several of New Zealand's greatest contemporary private gardens were developed over many decades by the original owners – Margaret Barker of Larnach Castle and Bev McConnell of Ayrilies are two that immediately come to mind. For a great garden to endure and become intergenerational, as has happened for the historic gardens of England, trusts need to be established and plans put in

place for futureproofing. Sir Miles is currently in his late eighties, and in 2012 he gifted his house and garden to the people of New Zealand via the Ohinetahi Charitable Trust. In the final pages of his book he writes "I hope that Ohinetahi will continue to be one of the best, most visited and enjoyed gardens, park, house and art gallery in New Zealand."

Ohinetahi (Fig. 8–9) really is one of the jewels of Banks Peninsula, and indeed of New Zealand. Sir Miles Warren's extraordinary design and architectural skills are fully reflected in the rich legacy that is Ohinetahi.

Websites (accessed June 2017)

Interview: Sir Miles Warren, by Rebecca Macfie, 7 December, 2012: www.noted.co.nz/archive/listener-nz-2012/interview-sir-miles-warren/

Sir Miles Warren's Ohinetahi, by Rosa Shiels, 27 March, 2013: www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/christchurch-life/avenues/home/8359304/Sir-Miles-Warrens-Ohinetahi

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Fig. 9 A view of the garden as it is today. Photo courtesy Ohinetahi.